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WHY EDUCATION FAILED TO EDUCATE HENRY ADAMS

I.

To any student of the deeper meaning and intent of education one of the most significant and suggestive of recent publications is *The Education of Henry Adams*. Interesting from various points of view, brilliant in style and enlivened with many a humorous turn, no wonder it has attracted a wide circle of readers. But its chief interest lies in the singularly intimate revelation it contains of the author himself, not so much what he did as what he was. According to its title the book professes to outline the successive stages in the author's mental development, the part which his various experiences from childhood up played in his education. As a matter of fact he tells us how little he was indebted to any of them. A more appropriate title would have been: "How Education Failed to Educate Henry Adams."

From the day when at about six years of age he was taken to school by his grandfather, John Quincy Adams, he maintained an attitude of silent revolt against the whole educational process. "In any and all its forms the boy detested school; and the prejudice became deeper with years. He always reckoned his school days, from ten to sixteen years old, as time thrown away." And when his school experience ended, "he felt no sensation but one of unqualified joy."

Following the example of his forebears he then entered Harvard College, because it was the thing to do, "though none of them, so far as known, had ever done any good there, or thought himself the better for it." He derived little or no benefit, he informs us, from the studies of the curriculum, from his professors, or from companionship with his college mates. From the last "he got nothing whatever, as help towards education, and little more from his masters." "The four years passed at college were, for his purposes, wasted. Harvard College was a good school, but what the boy most disliked was any school at all." He sums it all up in the statement that "as yet he knew nothing. Education had not begun."

For some years after graduation he lived a rather desultory life, apparently unable to hold himself firmly to any definite or consistent course. First he went to Berlin with a somewhat vague intention of studying Civil Law, whatever that might mean. He did not remain long enough to find out, nor to test what the University could do for him. "His first lecture was his last." Of his experiment in German education "nothing was left," he writes, "except the ghost of the Civil Law shut up in the darkest of closets, never to gibber again." He spent most of the ensuing eighteen months in acquiring the "accidental education" of the tourist. "In spite of swarming impressions he knew no more when he left Rome than when he entered it." He squandered several months on Paris. Then "with mixed emotions, but no education," he started for home. "He knew no more," he confesses, "for his practical purposes, than the day he graduated."

The years during the Civil War he passed as private secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, United States Minister to Great Britain, — an interesting experience, but, in his opinion, in these seven years "he had no more acquired education, than when he first trod the steps of the Adelphi Hotel in November, 1858." A little later he reluctantly became Assistant Professor of History in Harvard College. He held this position for seven years, meanwhile being also editor of the *North American Review*. They were seven years of discontent and dissatisfaction. His work was "on lines he had not chosen, in subjects for which he cared less than nothing, in a place he did not love, and before a future which repelled." "Lost" time is the frank, but harsh, verdict he passes upon these years of teaching; and his brief experience as editor "satiated most of his appetite for that career as a profession." His so-called education does not appear to have made any headway. "He seemed to know nothing." He had arrived at "the abyss of ignorance."

Notwithstanding his humorous attitude towards almost everything, one detects an undertone of regret and disappointment running through the book, as if, perhaps, he was conscious that Henry Adams had not maintained the high level of achievement and public service of the Adams family, one of

the most distinguished in American history. The blame he cynically would lay at the door of education. It would, perhaps, be hardly just to describe him as a "dilettante." But the revelation he gives of himself shows that he was not altogether wanting in certain characteristics of that species.

In the chapter on "A Dynamic Theory of History," he sets forth his philosophy of education. Man, he holds, is the creature of his environment. Instead of "capturing" the forces that surround him, harnessing them to his own will, modifying and combining them, and thereby effecting his own purposes, man is "captured" by these forces. "He suffers education, or growth. He is the sum of the forces that attract him. His body and his thought are alike their product. The movement of the forces controls the progress of his mind, since he can know nothing but the motions that impinge upon his senses, whose sum is education." "With little or no effort on his part all these forces form his thought, induce his action and even shape his figure."

As thus baldly stated, his theory of education is virtually fatalistic. It takes little or no account of the essential part the individual must play in the educative process, of how he uses educative forces and agencies, nor of the fact that success in obtaining an education depends not so much upon these external forces and influences, as upon his own effort, his thoughtful and willing response to them.

II.

Few have had larger or more varied educational advantages than Henry Adams. In spite of himself, they had probably done for him more than he was ready to concede, but evidently not so much as they could and should have done. At his own valuation they had failed to educate him. Why had they failed? is a pertinent inquiry. What was the fundamental cause of their failure? May it not be ascribed in large measure to his own lack of personal initiative and motive power, to the absence within himself of any impelling force steadily urging him to faithful, persistent self-activity? Without this no one can make the most of the means of education, or the most of himself in after life.

In school and in college he appears to have been an indifferent student, lacking in close application and without sufficient interest or ambition to improve his opportunities to the utmost. Nor, on the other hand, are school and college to be acquitted of all blame for his failure to be educated. Perhaps they were more at fault than young Adams himself, whose inherited ability made him a most promising subject for the very best they could do for him. Apparently they were content to spread before him an abundant menu of knowledge and information, without training him to think for himself or inoculating him with potent motives to self-activity.

If education is really to educate, it must generate motive power in the student and leave with him as its most valuable bequest, when he goes forth into the world of action, those moral and spiritual ideals and incentives, which will arouse, stimulate, kindle and inspire throughout life. The great schools and the great teachers of all ages have been reservoirs not only of learning, but especially of motive power and inspiration, which they have freely communicated to those who come under their influence. Do schools and colleges stress sufficiently the inspirational, as distinguished from the intellectual, side of education? Is not much of their teaching formal and mechanical, instead of stimulating and inspiring? Education has suffered much from the common practice of dealing with pupils in masses, instead of coming into such personal touch with the individual as to develop motive power, the will to self-activity. Like Henry Adams many pass through school and college without acquiring this power. Hence they fail, like him, to reap the full benefit of their educational advantages. They graduate without it into the world of active life, where the lack of it disqualifies them for high achievement. Motive power in a human life is not produced by spontaneous generation, any more than in a steam-engine. It is the prime function of education to generate this power through inspirational teaching. With such teaching school and college become dynamos, as it were, converting the statics of endowments, equipments and curricula into the dynamics of moral impulse and energy—into motive power.

III.

The failure of school and college to awaken and develop this power in Henry Adams suggests the practical inquiry: How can they cultivate in the student this prime factor in the formula of education and thus really educate him? What are the sources from which motive power can be derived? They are many, and we need not go far afield to discover them. One source may be found in human nature itself, in the powers and capacities with which man is endowed. The pronoun "I," that little word of only one letter—there are only two others so short in the English language, the article "a" and interjection "O"—what a wealth of meaning is compressed into that epitome of human personality! What a combination, a blending of powers and faculties, physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual, it represents! No other word but "God" is more significant. Men have spent a lifetime in the study of what that one word "I" stands for. Books upon books have been written, from scientific treatises to works of poets and novelists, in the effort to explore and measure the length and breadth, the height and depth, of its meaning. Shakespeare was profoundly impressed with the marvelous powers and capacities that dwell in humanity. After studying men and women with a keenness of insight and analysis never surpassed, perhaps never equalled, he exclaims: "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god!"

It is no mere exuberance of poetic fancy, when the author of the Eighth Psalm pays a similar tribute. "What is man," he asks, "that Thou" the Infinite One, "takest thought of him; and the son of man, that thou heedest him? Thou hast made him in rank a little less than divine; Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor; Thou hast given him dominion over the creatures of Thy hand; and to him hast Thou made all things subject." The story of the evolution of mankind from the crude, embryonic beginnings of what we call civilization, to its highest attainments in every field of human endeavor, is a conclusive demonstration of man's affinity with the divine.

Is there not motive power and inspiration in the thought of this kinship even with God Himself—in the thought that man is so richly endowed with all that can ennoble and dignify human nature? One of the seven sages of Greece coined the epigram “Know Thyself!” which was inscribed in letters of gold upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The most important office of education is to enable the student to know himself, the divine gifts and potencies within him, that he may be inspired to realize their possibilities.

Nor is it for nothing that man is thus allied with God Himself. He has a purpose to accomplish in every human life, a niche for each to fill in the forward movement of humanity, some work for each to perform, some duty for each to discharge, some positive good for each to do. As Lowell has finely sung:—

“No man is born into the world whose work
Is not born with him ; there is always work,
And tools to work withal, for those who will ;
And blessed are the horny hands that toil !
The busy world shoves angrily aside
The man who stands with arms akimbo set,
Until occasion tells him what to do ;
And he who waits to have his task marked out,
Shall die and leave his errand unfulfilled.”

There is something inspiring, something to awaken out of indifference and stir to joyous, unfaltering effort, in the reflection that this divine plan provides for everyone opportunity for service, if he will accept it, and offers him the privilege of associating himself with the goodly fellowship of those, who leave the world (or at least some small section of it) better, because they have lived in it. Education that is real and genuine, will help the student to realize for himself Thomas Carlyle's new beatitude: “Blessed is the man who has found his work,” the work appointed for him in this divine economy, the work in which he can make the most of himself and make himself the most useful.

IV.

There is also a wealth of motive power and of inspiration in the sense of duty, in the imperative claim it has upon us. Nothing is so invigorating to the entire spiritual and intellectual

nature. Nothing so nerves the soul to any effort, however severe or prolonged, as her voice — now clarion, now still and small — if we listen and obey. To many, duty is only a “stern lawgiver,” whose decrees they would gladly escape. They do a thing, if they do it at all, because they must, and not because they ought; and thus they lose out of their lives a guiding, inspiring force, whose place nothing else can take. Ambition cannot, for ambition is a fitful flame, burning now high, now low. Too often it is purely selfish, spurring the man onward to unworthy ends. Unless based upon and guided by the sense of duty, ambition belongs among the lower passions of the soul. Nor can the sense of pleasure or delight, as a stimulus to doing, be substituted for the sense of duty. For there are many things to be done which in and of themselves afford little or no enjoyment, or are positively repugnant; and whatever happiness may come to us in doing them comes from the consciousness that we are obeying the high behests of Duty, who never withholds the blessing of joy from those who submit themselves implicitly to her guidance. Said a great American lawyer and statesman: “I pride myself on my success in doing not the things I like to do, but the things I don’t like to do.” There is naught repellent in duty, if mind and heart are attuned to her service. To such — so Wordsworth sings — she wears —

“The Godhead’s most benignant grace,
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon her face.
Flowers laugh before her on their beds,
And fragrance in her footing treads.
She doth preserve the stars from wrong,
And the most ancient heavens, through her,
are fresh and strong.”

The sense of duty is the noblest of all principles or motives of action, save one, perhaps, — disinterested, unselfish love; and consciously or unconsciously it is the foundation and firm support even of that. Duty should be recognized as the Queen of life, to whom everyone owes a knightly allegiance. Devotion to duty makes heroes in peace, as well as in war. What a consecrated, heroic spirit speaks forth in the inscription upon the gravestone of Mary Lyon, founder of what is now Mount Hol-

yoke College and in her day the leader in the movement for the higher education of women,—“There is nothing in the universe that I am afraid of, but that I shall not know and do my duty.” The choicest spirits of all time, whether in conspicuous or humble station, have paid their cheerful homage to duty; and from her they have received power and inspiration, “light to guide,” strength for weakness, wisdom for ignorance, “the spirit of self-sacrifice,” “the confidence of reason,” and at last victory. A strong, controlling sense of duty is thus the central factor in every rightly ordered life. In recognition of this truth, the primary aim of education should be, to weave into the warp and woof of the character the principle of moral obligation as the supreme source of motive power in every relation of life. If it neglects to do this, it leaves the student essentially uneducated.

V.

The difficulties and obstacles one encounters are also a rich storehouse of inspiration and power. What would life be, if it offered no hard tasks, if all were plain sailing, a smooth, unruffled sea with no storms, no head-winds to oppose one's progress? A poverty-stricken affair indeed, and human beings poor, mean, contemptible travesties of real manhood and womanhood! Bravely met and conquered, difficulties are stepping-stones by which men rise to the heights of achievement. Faced with undaunted will, the very sternness with which they challenge one's advance will awaken new energies for the onset; and one victory will open the way for another. Or if defeat sometimes comes, it will be preparatory to a more decisive, a completer triumph. Are we not in danger of making the path of education too easy for the pupil, too much of a holiday excursion, by smoothing out the rough places and removing the obstructions that lie in his way, instead of using them as a source of motive power, to arouse him to greater and more strenuous effort?

VI.

To him who keeps mind and heart wide open to the impressions and impulses of the times in which he lives, there is abundant inspiration in the life and activity, the move-

ment and progress, of the world about him. Never in the world's history has there been a time so full of dynamic energy in all directions as in the last half century. A gentleman once said to the writer: "My chief regret is, that I was born on the wrong side of 1850." As he looked about him and observed the events that are taking place, the growth of communities, the amazing development and expansion of the world, the inventions and discoveries that are being made, the advances in science and knowledge of every kind, the great social changes which make for a larger and truer life, and the multiplied avenues for doing good, he longed to be young again, that he might share to the full in the opportunities of the present, in the exhilaration of living and acting in times like these, when the nations are in the throes of a new birth, and the old order, outworn and discredited, is giving place to a new world, wherein we shall see realized Lincoln's definition of democracy as "government of the people, by the people and for the people," a brotherhood of humanity, in which the Golden Rule shall control social and international relations,—a world of universal peace, based upon the supremacy everywhere of right over might, and in which a nation's influence shall be determined, not so much by its population, territory, wealth or armaments, as primarily by its loyalty to honor and duty, and to the ideals of character and service.

Any thoughtful person watching with eager interest the tragic upheaval through which the world is passing and the momentous social changes following in its wake and bringing new opportunities and responsibilities, may well feel as did Lord Nelson at the famous Battle of the Baltic, when the naval supremacy of England hung in the balance: "It is warm work," he said, "and this day may be the last to any of us, at any moment. But, mark you! I would not be elsewhere for countless thousands." No one can live in sympathetic contact with the stirring activities about him, with the struggles going on everywhere towards better conditions in community, state and nation, or in the world at large without receiving into his own life an unfailing spring of moral force, constraining him to fulfil his part, humble or distinguished, in the drama of human progress. Here is the golden opportunity of school and college really to educate.

Through the many practical problems suggested by such studies as current history, economics, sociology and civics, they should give the student this sympathetic contact with the world in which he lives and thus awaken thought and generate the motive power that will render his life most effective.

VII.

In education of all grades, from primary to professional, the lives of those who have lived worthily and nobly and have achieved greatly are charged with incentive and encouragement for all who observe and study them. Moral principles and precepts, however pure and exalted, make slight appeal to human nature, so long as they remain in the realm of abstractions. But when they are incarnated in men and women, and translated into character and action, they become an inspiring force, which education should use to the full as a means of creating motive power. For in everyone there is a chord that vibrates to the music of true nobility and goodness. As George Eliot says, the choice and master spirits of all times "hover in the mind as patron saints, invisibly helping," "making better by their presence," inciting to "deeds of daring rectitude," to "scorn of miserable aims that end with self." What a memorable revelation of sacrificial devotion, never surpassed and seldom equalled, the Great War has bequeathed to the world,—a treasury of inspiration and motive power for all time!

VIII.

A like stimulating influence comes from companionship with the best books. Books may be divided into three classes: *First*, those which weaken the moral sense and lower the moral tone of the reader, making wickedness familiar and evil appears less bad than it really is. The *second* class includes many that belong on the border line. Improbable or overwrought, they unsettle the mind and make the reader discontented and dissatisfied with the prosaic monotony of everyday duty. Or they are morally and mentally colorless, with no positive tendency to evil, but, on the other hand, with nothing to improve and ennoble the character or to strengthen and elevate the mind. To this class belongs

much of the light literature of the day. The reading of such books confuses and enfeebles the mind and fritters away its powers upon mere nothingness. Then there is the *third* class, stimulating to thought, wholesome in moral tone and at the same time admirable as literature; books that help towards wisdom and righteousness, books stored with the ripe thinking of the best minds, themselves inspired, and thus fitted to inspire others. Education can render the student no service of higher value than to cultivate in him a taste for such literature and guide him in the choice and use of books that are permanently inspirational.

IX.

It remains to mention one more source of power. The writer once visited the studio of a distinguished American sculptor in Florence. Conducting me into an inner room, he showed the model in clay of a statue he was fashioning. He told me he had been working upon it for six years and intended to make it his masterpiece. "Each day," he said, "I come in here and do something to bring my clay model nearer to the ideal I have set before myself. It seems sometimes as if I should never attain it; and when I think I am almost there, I find that my ideal has receded from my view. As I have moved towards it, it has taken on more beautiful outlines and a nobler mien than before, and I am still far from making it live in my statue." A few years later the artist died. I know not whether he ever realized his ideal. Probably he did not—fully, at least. But for all that, this ideal, held in loving devotion before his mind and daily becoming more lovely and enchanting, inspired him to patient effort and drew him irresistibly onward to higher excellence.

In the work of training mind, forming character—in a word, of shaping the life—education should hold steadily before the student's vision the highest ideals of what he should be and do—not dim, hazy shadows, dreamy and unsubstantial, but something clear and definite, something so worthy and true, that it will win his allegiance,—ideals of personal character and conduct, of good citizenship, of social and public service, of business and professional integrity and honor. Firmly established in mind and heart, such ideals will be a source of lifelong inspiration.

On an old Italian gateway there is this inscription, which might well be traced in letters of gold on every schoolhouse and college building or above the door of every schoolroom: "So enter here, that daily thou mayest become more learned and more thoughtful; so depart, that daily thou mayest become more useful to thy country and to mankind." Here in brief is the ideal aim of all true education—to produce thinkers, men of vision and not mere scholars, men who regard life as above all an opportunity for service. This ideal will be realized, if school and college accustom the student to drink deeply at these fountains of motive power and inspiration. And when at the end he reviews his life career and, mayhap, like Henry Adams, writes his autobiography—unlike him he will have no occasion, or disposition—nor the cynicism—to indict his education as a lame and impotent system.

WINTHROP DUDLEY SHELDON.

Philadelphia, Pa.